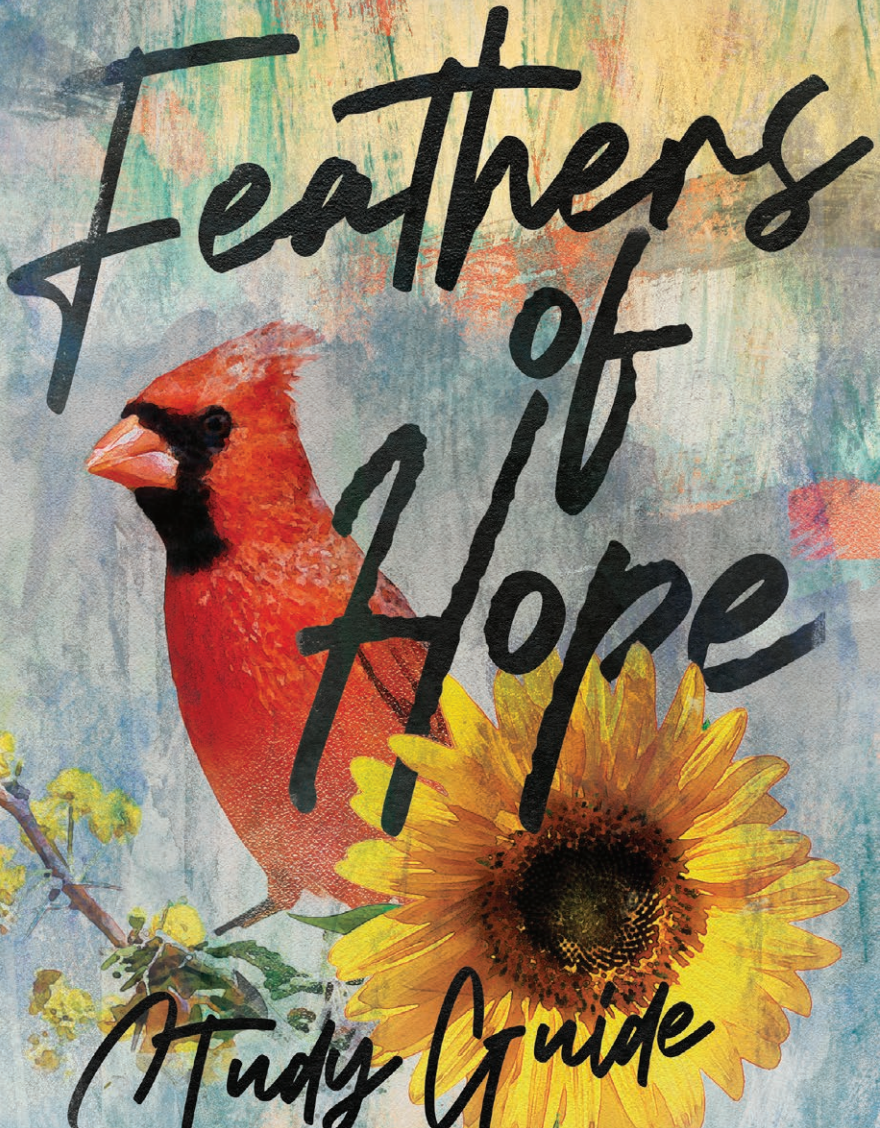


SHARON GARLOUGH BROWN

Feathers of Hope

A painting of a red cardinal perched on a yellow sunflower. The cardinal is on the left, facing left, with a black face and a red body. The sunflower is on the right, with a dark brown center and bright yellow petals. The background is a textured, abstract mix of blue, green, and orange.

Study Guide

EIGHT WEEKS FOR INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS



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WEEK ONE

Chapters One Through Four



VISIO DIVINA: WORN OUT (1882, PENCIL ON PAPER, VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM)

Visio divina (“sacred seeing”) is similar in practice to *lectio divina* (“sacred reading”). In *lectio divina* we are invited into a slow and prayerful pondering of Scripture, paying attention to the words or phrases that stir us and lead us into conversation and communion with God. In *visio divina* we are invited into a slow and prayerful pondering of visual images (paintings, photographs, sculpture, etc.), noticing the details that catch our attention and draw us into conversation and communion with God.

Each week, you can choose when and how often to pray with the art. To begin, find an online image of the work. Then ask God to guide your attention as you look at it. If you are new to the practice of praying with art, you might find the provided reflection prompts helpful.

The weary and bent elderly man, Adrianus Jacobus Zuyderland, lived at the Dutch Reformed Almshouse for Men and Women in The Hague. Vincent made several drawings of *Worn Out* before creating a lithograph of the work. He later changed the title of the lithograph to *At Eternity’s Gate*. (If you’re interested in reading how Vincent interpreted this image, visit www.vangoghletters.org and search for letter #288, November 1882.)

Begin by quieting yourself in God’s presence. Then let your gaze rove slowly over the sketch. What words come to mind to describe the mood of the drawing? What memories or feelings are evoked in

you as you look at him? Which part of the drawing most captures your attention and invites you to linger? Why? How does this sketch mirror your own life or the lives of those you love?

Speak with God about what is stirred in you as you “read” the painting in prayer. What do you need from God right now?

WEEK ONE: DAY ONE

Chapter One

Scripture Contemplation: 2 Corinthians 5:1-4

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling—if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Read the verses aloud. Which images or promises connect with your life or longings right now? Speak with God about whatever stirs you.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What does this opening chapter reveal about who Wren is? Which of her traits, gifts, or struggles stand out to you? Why?
2. The image of the molting cardinal catches Wren’s attention, both for her own life and for the people she serves. Think about your own experiences of gradual or dramatic loss and change. How does this image speak to you?

3. What would you put in your shadow box? What do these items declare about your passions, history, loved ones, or losses? (If you are participating in a group study, choose an item to bring with you to your meeting.)

4. What evidence of molting do you see in others' lives? In your local community? In the world? How are you being prompted to pray? Offer your response to God.

WEEK ONE: DAY TWO

Chapter Two

Scripture Contemplation: Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Quiet yourself in God's presence with a few deep breaths. When you're ready, open your hands and release to Jesus any weariness or burdens that weigh you down. Keeping your hands open, receive from him the gifts he longs to pour out to you. Throughout the day, open your hands to release burdens and receive Jesus' rest.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What evidence of molting do you glimpse in Kit's life? In what ways do you identify with her?

2. What would you place in a file marked “transition”? Consider personal, cultural, and global upheaval and change. Which kinds of transitions are hardest for you to embrace? Why? Speak with God about what you notice.

3. Look at Vincent’s *Worn Out* sketch. Would you be more like Mara, ready to kiss and encourage the weary man, or like Kit, ready to sit alongside and share the silence with him? What do you need from others when you’re exhausted or despairing?

4. How confident are you in God’s love for you? For others? Is it easier to share God’s love with others or receive it for yourself? Why? Speak with God about any longings or resistance.

WEEK ONE: DAY THREE

Chapter Two

Scripture Contemplation: Isaiah 42:1-4

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed

until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Slowly read the verses aloud. Which descriptions of the Messiah speak most deeply to you? Why? Speak with God about what you notice.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What kinds of needs or issues are you most passionate about? Why? How have your personal struggles, losses, and hopes shaped your engagement with others, individually and in society?
2. How does Kit respond to Mara's stories about conflict and her efforts to address racial bias at Crossroads? Does her internal reaction resonate with you? Frustrate you? Why? Talk honestly with God about your reaction to this scene.
3. What does the word *justice* evoke for you? Is there any resistance or fear attached to the word? If so, why?
4. Is it easy for you to care about issues and needs that don't directly impact you or your loved ones? Why or why not? Speak with God about what you notice.
5. In what ways does the image of pinfeathers speak to you?

WEEK ONE: DAY FOUR

Chapter Three

Scripture Contemplation: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Slowly and prayerfully read the verses aloud. Then meditate on each description of love, considering how God has loved you in these ways. Take time to receive this kind of generous love from God. Notice any resistance, either to a description of love or to your receiving it. Which descriptions most challenge or comfort you? Why?

FOR REFLECTION

1. Which elements of Wren's grief or forgiveness process resonate with you? Speak with God about what you see.
2. Ponder Wren's imagined triptych of cardinals: life before molting, life during molting, life after molting. What helps you practice hope during seasons of loss and change? In what ways has suffering marked you?
3. Which words or themes usually come to mind when you think about stewardship? Which of the retreat themes Kit has planned (stewarding love, stewarding affliction, stewarding grace) most intrigues you? Why?

4. What does it look like to practice “long-suffering” love in a culture that is quick to anger and prone to disregard or “cancel” others? How might the regular and habitual practice of receiving God’s love enlarge and enable you to love those who aren’t easy to love? Speak with God about what you need.
5. What catches your attention from Kit’s prayerful pondering of Vincent’s *The Sower*? (You’ll have an opportunity next week to pray with this painting.) What is the sower’s call or invitation to you? How will you respond?

WEEK ONE: DAY FIVE

Chapter Four

Scripture Contemplation: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Slowly and prayerfully read the verses aloud. As you read, picture the people (or types of people) you find most difficult to love, the ones who don’t have “easy access” to your affection. Which qualities of love are hardest for you to offer others? Speak honestly to God about what you see and what you need.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What is your initial impression of Sarah? Is she someone you would find easy to love? Why or why not?

2. Identify some of the issues Sarah and Kit disagree about. How do you navigate conflict and disagreement with others? How does Kit's reminder of the fractured state of the church at Corinth influence the way you read and receive Paul's words about love?

3. "What we ourselves have generously and abundantly received, we freely offer to others." Why is it essential to focus on how God has loved us as we try to love others well? How is this connected with the practice of stewardship?

4. Ponder these words from Kit: "When you recognize a lack of love in your own heart, name it to God and receive God's grace and forgiveness and power. Remember, this isn't an exercise in self-condemnation but an opportunity to diligently seek God for a gift he longs to give you in greater and greater measure." Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 again. What do you need from God as you seek to love not in generalities, but in specifics?

WEEK ONE: DAY SIX

Review

Return to any reflection questions you weren't able to respond to this week. Prayerfully review your notes. Do any particular themes, struggles, longings, or invitations emerge for you? Speak with God about what you notice. (If you'd like to do an extended prayer exercise with John 13 and the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, see my book *Barefoot*.)

WEEK ONE

Group Discussion

One of the best gifts we can give one another in community is the promise of confidentiality. As you begin to walk together, commit to creating a safe place. Devote yourselves to being faithful stewards of one another's stories. Only then are we truly free to offer our authentic selves to one another, without fear of being judged or betrayed. As you continue to journey together, remind yourselves frequently of your commitment to each other. Pray for God to guard, protect, and establish you in your life together.

When you gather, avoid the impulse to give advice, “fix,” or commiserate (“I know just how you feel because something similar happened to me when . . .”). Give space to pregnant silence. Don't rush to fill the quiet, even if it feels uncomfortable or awkward. Trust that the Holy Spirit is stirring hearts in the midst of the silence and giving courage to speak. (This will be a particularly important gift to offer the introverts in your group.) Practice listening for the presence of God in both the silence and the words offered. Encourage one another to share from the heart, without compelling anyone to do so. Gently and lovingly remind one another to return to these practices of life together whenever you find yourself drifting off course.

Each week you'll find suggested group questions, but feel free to modify these according to the needs and desires of your group. As you find your rhythm together, you may simply want to share in an open-ended way what God is stirring as a result of your prayerful reflections during the week. Resist the temptation to be distracted by “book club” discussions. Instead, let the characters' journeys lead you into fruitful, honest conversations about how God is shaping and forming you as you reflect and pray.

Some of the issues raised in *Feathers of Hope* are emotionally charged and difficult to talk about. They may also tap deep wounds. Give one another (and yourself) lots of grace as you navigate these topics and themes. Go gently. Walk humbly. And ask for the courage to listen well as you practice loving one another.

It's a gift to share the journey with others. May your group time be sacred space in the presence of God.

(Group leaders: Each week, choose one of the Scripture texts from the daily readings as an opening prayer. If possible, light a Christ candle to remind yourselves that you are in the presence of God together. You may also wish to have a digital or printed image of the *visio divina* piece available for prayer or discussion.)

Intro: If your group hasn't met before, offer introductions and share one personal desire as you begin the study. What do you hope you'll be able to say at the end of the journey in eight weeks?

1. As a way of continuing your introductions to one another, share (or describe) an item you would put into a shadow box. What does this item reveal about who you are and what you value?
2. Discuss the image of molting. How does it speak to you? What evidence of molting do you see in your own life? Your community? The world? (Let these reflections shape your time of prayer at the end of your meeting.)
3. What are some of the issues you're most passionate about? Why? If you're comfortable, share something that Kit and Mara's conversation prompted you to ponder or remember about your own engagement with (or avoidance of) issues of race and justice.
4. Share any aha moments from the first retreat session about stewarding love. What do you need from God? How can the group pray for you?
5. Any other insights to share from the week? What challenged or inspired you? Why? Close by reading 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 in unison and pray for one another.

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